

AMERICA NEEDS TO RETHINK POLICIES TOWARD MID EAST

DR. MICHAEL HUDSON

On November 16, 2005, Al-Hewar Center, a discussion forum in metro Washington, hosted a presentation by Dr. Michael Hudson, Director and Saif Ghobash Professor of Arab Studies at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University. Dr. Hudson spoke about “Post 9/11 American Policy Toward the Arab World and Islam.” The event was moderated by former ambassador Sadek Sulaiman.

Despite all of the bad things that have happened to U.S.-Arab relations since World War I, the worst of them being America’s continuing and growing support for the state of Israel and its conquests, Arabs still like Americans, because they make a distinction between the American people and the American government’s policies, said Hudson. In polling data, Arab support for U.S. *policies* falls to single digits in certain areas, whereas Arabs are robustly in favor of such *values* as democracy and freedom. It is a paradox, he said, that there should be such a disjunction between America’s dismal reputation in the Middle East, and the readiness of the people in the region to distinguish between what the government does and what America stands for.

The situation declined after World War I with the discovery of large quantities of oil in the region, the advent of WWII, and, finally, the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state but *not* into a Palestinian state. The Middle East also became an arena for the global competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Because the U.S. was increasingly committed to the support of Israel, American diplomats had difficulty convincing the Arabs to join them in the struggle against communism. The Soviets got a lot of mileage out of taking up a kind of Arab nationalist cause, while the Americans tried to play a double game and became complicated to deal with, said Hudson.

When the Soviet Union disappeared, things began to change in the region. In the last 15 years or so, a considerably different global and regional security system has begun to emerge, said Hudson, who identified five recent changes that should cause us to rethink our approaches to Middle East international relations:

- 1) In the cultural domain, communal identities are in flux as never before, fueled by globalization trends and the new information technology;
- 2) In the economic domain, globalization (commercial, financial, and technological flows centered on the advanced economies – especially the United States) relegates the Middle East to deepened dependency, while neoclassical economic development strategies intensify inequalities and social tensions.

3) In the structural domain, the preeminence of states as the primary actors in international relations is challenged by societal and transnational structures, globalized transnational or trans-local networks, or as some people call them, international regimes or practices that don't really conform to the classical notions of states.

4) In the power domain, terrorism and the proliferation of certain weapons of mass destruction dramatically alter the traditional conceptions of balance of power. This has been a huge conundrum since 9/11, said Hudson. By all conventional measures, the United States is by far the most powerful state in the world, but it is currently frustrated by an adversary that doesn't have armies, territories, or economic infrastructure, and to which none of the traditional measures of power seem to apply. Even though it is, on the whole, a low-tech adversary, it seems to be able to strike us in our homeland and to wreak enormous changes on our daily lives as we live in a highly tense national security state. We have all come to live with the expectation of terrorism as a permanent threat.

5) Above all, America has become the world's sole superpower. This is critical because America is so deeply involved in the Middle East.

Hudson recounted that, at a recent international conference, there was a discussion as to whether, in this unipolar world where there is no longer a balance of powers, the American super power, or even hyper-power, would be a surrogate for peaceful, orderly world government, or whether a dominant, unchallenged power, would arrogantly and pridefully exploit its power and become domineering.

Since the first President Bush, American presidents have tried to conceptualize this new global system as benign and benevolent. Madeline Albright spoke of the U.S. as the "indispensable" nation; Bush the First talked about the New World Order; and the current President Bush speaks essentially of remaking the world in America's free and democratic image.

However, said Hudson, when one really examines the Bush Doctrine and the insistence on fundamental change in the rest of the world (whether they want it or not), one has to wonder whether the famous phrase the "Arrogance of Power," has not in fact emerged as the underlying concept in the way the United States conducts its affairs in the world, and especially in the Middle East today.

Under the first scenario, the United States has both the moral duty and the power to reform the world. Those who take this tack say that it would not be true to our calling simply to play the politics of pragmatism and real politik as traditional diplomacy has always counseled. Our superior position in the world gives us both the means and the moral duty to reshape things. Hence, in application to the Middle East, we have a doctrine of freedom and radical reform. The current administration often states that freedom is the most fundamental right for people everywhere, no matter what the religion or culture.

However, 9/11 added another dimension. Despite all our power and moral force, we are frightened. We have been attacked; we are fighting a global war on terrorism that we do not appear to be winning; and there is no end in sight.

One way to solve the problem of terrorism is to offer reform, and one of the main thrusts of the Bush administration is to promote political, economic, liberal democracy in this region. A number of programs have been instituted to try to bring this about.

However, the administration argued that, in some places, “regime change” was the only way to eliminate the terrorist threat. In the extreme case, invading a country is the only way to bring down the regime and establish a free and democratic and, surely, pro-American, regime, in which terrorism cannot flourish.

Between offering reform programs and sending in the Marines, the idea is basically to transform the world. That, Hudson believes, has been the modality of the Bush administration.

The problem, though, is that it doesn’t seem to be working very well, said Hudson. He called America’s activities and accomplishments since 9/11 at best a mixed record, but with maybe more bad than good.

It is not all bad news, he said. Afghanistan is the best and the closest we have to a success story. We were able to eliminate the Taliban and disrupt Al-Qaeda’s infrastructure, which was no small accomplishment. With assistance from the United States and other Western countries, a new regime and some institutional order has been established in Afghanistan. Of course, it’s not over yet, and it continues to be a problem, but at least it is not an inflamed problem or a place where terrorists are breeding.

That cannot be said, however, for the other big war we are fighting, which is in Iraq, where we are stuck. Not only have we been unable to produce a stable, liberal, democratic political order that will be pro-American and, of course, pro-Israel because that, surely, is one of the unspoken motives in all this, said Hudson, we find to the contrary that Iraq is in chaos. There is a thriving movement that some people call an insurgency, others call terrorism, and still others call legitimate national resistance, that continues to bedevil the American-British occupiers and their Iraqi clients who have come to power.

Instead of establishing a liberal democracy, it turns out that the Iraqi government that we have worked so hard to install, seems to be dominated by, of all things, Islamist parties allied to one of the two other remaining members of the “Axis of Evil”, Iran, and the other part seems to be about to split off and become the separate country of Kurdistan.

Iraq is beginning to emerge as the kind of place that Afghanistan was when the Soviets were there trying to run it, Hudson noted, namely, a place where extremists and terrorists gravitate to and from. We are beginning to worry that terrorism has actually gotten stronger in Iraq and is up for export to other countries. It is not a pretty picture, said Dr. Hudson, and the statistics do not suggest that there has been substantial diminution of global terrorist activity. Too many places have been attacked, from Indonesia, to Spain, to London, indicating that Al Qaeda has metastasized into autonomous globules of evil intent and capability, and thus, our insecurity remains.

Turning to where things currently stand, Hudson noted that American popularity is way down, resistance or terrorism (whatever you choose to call it) is on an upswing, and America continues to insist that none of this is due to U.S. policies.

We need to understand more adequately the causes of terrorism because our current explanations don't seem to be doing the job, said Dr. Hudson. We need to open the debate, and we should not allow the public debate on Middle Eastern matters to be monopolized by the think-tanks, media, opinion makers, and politicians who, for the most part, tend to look at this part of the world through an Israeli lens. Don't let the neo-cons and the Israeli lobby monopolize things, he stated.

He listed eight ideas that might improve America's chances for success:

- 1) Stop the torture in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and other places, and similar activities that might be considered war crimes;
- 2) End the U.S. military presence in Iraq. We should not cut and run, but we need to set a timetable for withdrawal, because the resistance in Iraq is very much fueled by the presence of alien forces;
- 3) Rethink Israel's privileged connection to us. The issue is completely out of balance, and polling data consistently indicates that the Palestine issue and America's posture is a fundamental irritant to public opinion in the Middle East;
- 4) Work to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine;
- 5) In the war on terror, concentrate more on law enforcement techniques than on full-scale traditional warfare;
- 6) Contemplate regime change and its possible consequences more carefully before acting on it.
- 7) In public diplomacy, listen more than lecture.
- 8) Regarding political reform, when advocating democracy and participation, we should be less ambiguous about whether Islamist political organizations should be allowed to participate. The Bush administration is inclined to think that that is very dangerous, although they have already (inadvertently) allowed a couple of political Islamist parties not only to participate, but actually to run affairs in Iraq. Other things being equal, it is probably better to be inclusive of Islamist organizations rather than trying to exclude them, said Hudson.

On none of these points so far has the Bush administration grasped the essence of the matter or taken decisive steps, Dr. Hudson sated. While some things may be going in a positive direction, the preponderance of evidence inclines one to pessimism, he concluded.

Dr. Hudson's presentation was followed by an animated discussion with the audience.
